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Florida Trend

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RECREATION

Brian Van Bower, one of Florida's leading pool designers, is out to bring art to a business he thinks is still much too conventional.

LIQUIDITY

By Cynthia Barnett



HIGH-TECH TOUCH: Brian Van Bower designed this pool to match the 1920s style of the house, with all the luxuries of 21st-century technology, including an in-floor cleaning system. The interior is finished with Venetian glass tiles. The lion heads overlooking the pool spout water. Price: \$175,000.



POOL LAGOON: This Van Bower lagoon-style pool features a waterfall and an elevated spa with a "misting rain feature." Price: \$160,000.

The revelation hit Brian Van Bower during a river boat cruise down Fort Lauderdale's Intracoastal Waterway in the mid-1980s. Peeking into the back yards of the rich, he saw a succession of cookie-cutter pools that didn't come close to the distinctiveness or extravagance of the homes.

Why, he asked himself, would someone spend millions designing and building a home only to put in a ho-hum pool?

"I thought about it and thought about it," says Van Bower, who at the time owned a Miami pool company with construction, renovation, retail and service divisions. "And I figured out the answer was that no one was offering anything else."

So Van Bower dove into upscale pool design, launching a firm called Aquatic Consultants Inc. in 1989. By 1991, he'd sold off his other businesses. Today, he is one of the most-sought-after pool consultants in Florida, designing jaw-dropping "water shapes," as he calls them, that can carry \$1 million price tags.

Van Bower, whose first pool job was as a cabana boy slathering suntan lotion on tourists' backs at the Suez Motel on Miami Beach, also has become a guru preaching pool design as art in an industry with a reputation for uniformity.

Fire and water

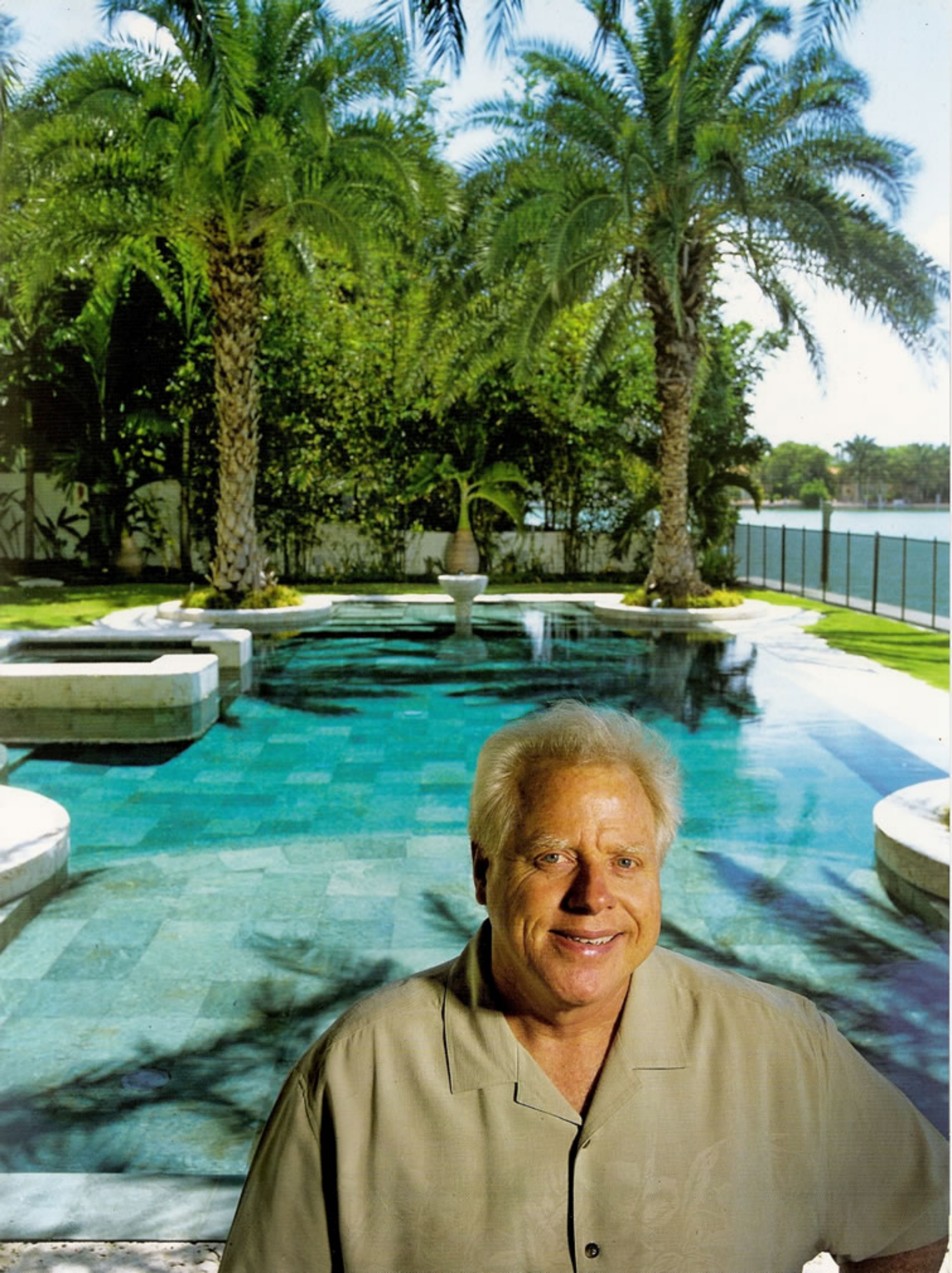
Emblematic of Van Bower's work is the spectacular back yard of the Peterson family in Miami Beach. Van Bower started with a 3,200-sq.-ft. yard comprised of a "dilapidated, cracked patio, a barbecue and a basketball hoop," says Jim Peterson, a senior vice president at Northern Trust.

Today, the space is a paradise of blue water, green jungle and marble decking, with benches and planters styled in art deco to match the home. From atop an elevated corner fireplace, water cascades in front of the flames into a bubbling spa. The spa, in turn, sends gentle sheets of water over a round glass porthole into the 1,000-sq.-ft. pool. The "deep end" is in the middle.

Along one side, the Petersons can lounge on a shallow tanning ledge. Other features include stands for volleyball games and beach umbrellas and fountain jets that eliminate background noise. The dark gray finish creates the look of a deep-blue lagoon.

At the opposite end of the pool from the fireplace, a majestic, night-lit Medjool date tree rises from a water-side planter, part of the lush tropical landscaping that buffers the back yard from neighbors.

The whole package: \$180,000. The design was one of Van Bower's



RECREATION

more modest jobs. A recent pricier one: To a pool in Wellington, Van Bower added a 15-foot-tall Mayan-like temple with water cascading down steps into a catch basin that in turn flows into an elevated black-granite spa featuring 25 therapy jets along two angled-back side benches. A fire — controlled by electronic ignition — appears to float on the surface of the basin. The complete project cost \$265,000.

Peterson, for one, says his pool was worth every penny. He calls Van Bower a meticulous designer who had long conversations with everyone in the

family — including the three teenagers — as he planned their pool. “He was always coming by to eyeball the work and always bringing over a great bottle of wine for us to enjoy,” says Peterson.

Along the way, Van Bower became a friend. When the job was over, he picked the Petersons up in a limo, took them to dinner at Norman’s in Coral Gables and then clubbing at South

Beach, something the couple hadn’t done since before their kids were born.

The fine wines and limousines are part of Van Bower’s philosophy that “lifestyle is important to doing business” with an upscale clientele that likes to live well.

And *la vie en rose* isn’t something Van Bower has to fake as he tools around Miami in his sapphire blue Jaguar XJ8.

Pool Trends

The 1,000-member Florida Swimming Pool Association is led by a retired brigadier general who flew F-16s in the Air Force. John Schwartz is also a mechanical engineer with an MBA. Here’s his take on some of Florida’s pool trends:

HOT MARKETS

The Orlando area and southwest Florida from Port Charlotte south.

WHO’S DIGGING

Schwartz estimates that more than half of the pools being built in Florida are going into new subdivisions. However, many are going in the back yards of old homes, particularly in built-out coastal counties such as Pinellas. “A lot of retirees in the 1950s and ’60s were too frugal for pools,” says Schwartz. “But the young families and retiring Baby Boomers now buying those homes see value in adding one.”

THE INDUSTRY

The Swimming Pool Association plans to push the Florida Legislature in 2005 for more stringent regulation of people who clean and treat pools. The group has come up with a 60-hour course teaching everything from how pump motors work to how to use chemicals. Schwartz says the push harkens change for an industry too well known for subpar building and maintenance. “I think there’s a cultural change going on in the industry across the state,” he says. “Along with greater professionalism, you’re seeing beauty and design elements priced so that people can afford them.”



REFLECTIVE: The “elevated perimeter overflow” design serves as a reflective fountain but is also a swimming pool. The sides of this Ponte Vedra Beach pool are finished with black granite; the interior is black ceramic tile.



NIGHT LIFE: The Peterson family pool in Miami Beach highlights lush landscaping, spa-side fireplace and bubbling fountain jets. Price: \$180,000.



CASCADE: Another “elevated perimeter overflow” design, this Wellington spa designed by Van Bower and built by Doug Hackl features a stair-stepped water cascade and a fire that appears to float. A stone river god keeps watch. Price: \$265,000.

The son of Miami restaurateurs, he is encyclopedic in his knowledge of fine food and wines and has a “small” humidity-controlled wine cellar of about 600 labels. He was a founder of the south Florida chapter of the American Institute of Wine & Food and the long-time host of the popular south Florida radio show “The Good Life.”

Against the tide

Six years ago, Van Bower and two like-minded West Coast pool designers launched an educational company called Genesis 3. They teach drawing, design and construction techniques to pool professionals who pay \$3,400 for four days of instruction that includes wine-tasting and lifestyle programs to “better enable you to relate to like-minded clients.”

Genesis 3 makes up only about 10% of Van Bower’s mid-six-figure annual

revenue, the majority of which is generated by his design fees.

Still, Genesis 3 has put Van Bower and his partners on the wrong side of some colleagues at the National Spa & Pool Institute, who are irked that the company is siphoning off NSPI’s professional training business. In the late 1990s, some institute members tagged Van Bower and his partners as “the three pigs” for criticizing NSPI’s annual design awards, which they complained were rewarding low-bid pool contractors for following someone else’s design rather than using their own creativity and talent.

Now, others in the industry seem to be coming around to the philosophy that well-designed pools aren’t just for the rich, says Genesis 3 partner Skip Phillips of California-based Questar Pools. “It turns out there are a lot of people who share our vision,” he says.

Hundreds of pool builders have been through the Genesis 3 program. And the company has done educational seminars for the likes of Lakeland-based San Juan Pools, which manufactures fiberglass pools. “Why can’t you float fire on water and do the other sorts of things we do in a manufactured pool?” Phillips asks. “We intend to have an impact on the middle class.”

Indeed, while pools designed by Van Bower can run from \$100,000 to more than \$1 million, he takes pride in smaller projects and in designing upscale pools for middle-class families.

“You could have a simple pool and add little tiny details, like two spray jets, that will cost only \$1,000 but give you the sound and visual water that you might find in an upscale product,” Van Bower says. “My philosophy is that everyone deserves something a little special.”

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